



## Benjamin Constant

(1767 Lausanne – 1830 Paris)

Henri Benjamin Constant de Rebecque is at his time quite a unique European figure. Well travelled already with his French-Swiss family, he studies in the universities of Erlangen, Germany, and Edinburgh, Scotland, where he gets acquainted with the ideas of Adam Smith and Adam Ferguson. Further intellectual influence comes from Montesquieu and Rousseau on the French side and from Kant in Germany. Constant's long-time liaison with Madame de Staël, a famous and influential intellectual and writer, stimulates his interest in political theory. Being a man with many talents and ambitions, Constant pursues a successful literary career as novelist, political writer and publisher and a political career at the same time. As a politician, he works with Napoleon under the consulate, but follows Madame de Staël into exile and lives for twelve years in Germany and Switzerland. From 1819-30, except 1823, he is a member of the French parliament, controversial, but respected and well published as a liberal voice who supports the democratic movement of these difficult years.

Though Constant advocates constitutional monarchy and an aristocratic upper chamber, he develops influential theories on parliamentary rule. Seeing clearly the dangers of majority despotism in Rousseau's "volonté générale", Constant tries to define

why and where government is threatening the liberty of the citizens. In contrast to individual errors, he argues, erroneous legislation creates much more damage and affects the whole state, which, on top, will hardly be admitted by the legislators. In the tradition of Montesquieu, he supports a system of checks and balances and above all freedom of the press as a precondition for the accountability of government.

Constant is quite a radical liberal in his focus on personal freedom, which in its essence cannot be subjected to majority rule without the danger of falling back into despotism. His catalogue of basic freedoms is remarkable, listing personal freedom, religious freedom, freedom of opinion and expression, guarantee of property and protection against arbitrary decisions. In the spirit of the declaration of human and civic rights of 1789, Constant even proclaims a right of resistance against oppression if these basic rights should be violated by the state. In the field of international relations, Constant has been somewhat too optimistic. He thought that wars were a historic relic of the feudal past and could be replaced by trade. War and international trade, he said, are only two different ways of reaching the same goal: Getting what one desires. But many of Benjamin Constant's original ideas don't strike us as such today because e.g. parliamentarianism, individual freedoms or separation of state and church have become so commonplace and self-evident by now.

### Literature:

Principes de politique applicables à tous les gouvernements représentatifs, 1815

Benjamin Constant: Political Writings, trans. and ed. Biancamaria Fontana, Cambridge University Press, 1988

A Guide to the Published Works of Benjamin Constant, by Cecil Patrick Courtney, Oxford, Voltaire Foundation at the Taylor Institution, 1985

### Websites:

<http://www2.unil.ch/ibc/> (in French)

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